

The Paris Commune

Zine assembled in March 2014 in Berlin, to accompany a screening of Peter Watkins' film *La Commune.*

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Rimbaud

Lissagaray

Weiss

Michel

The Situationist International

Bonney

Tiqqun

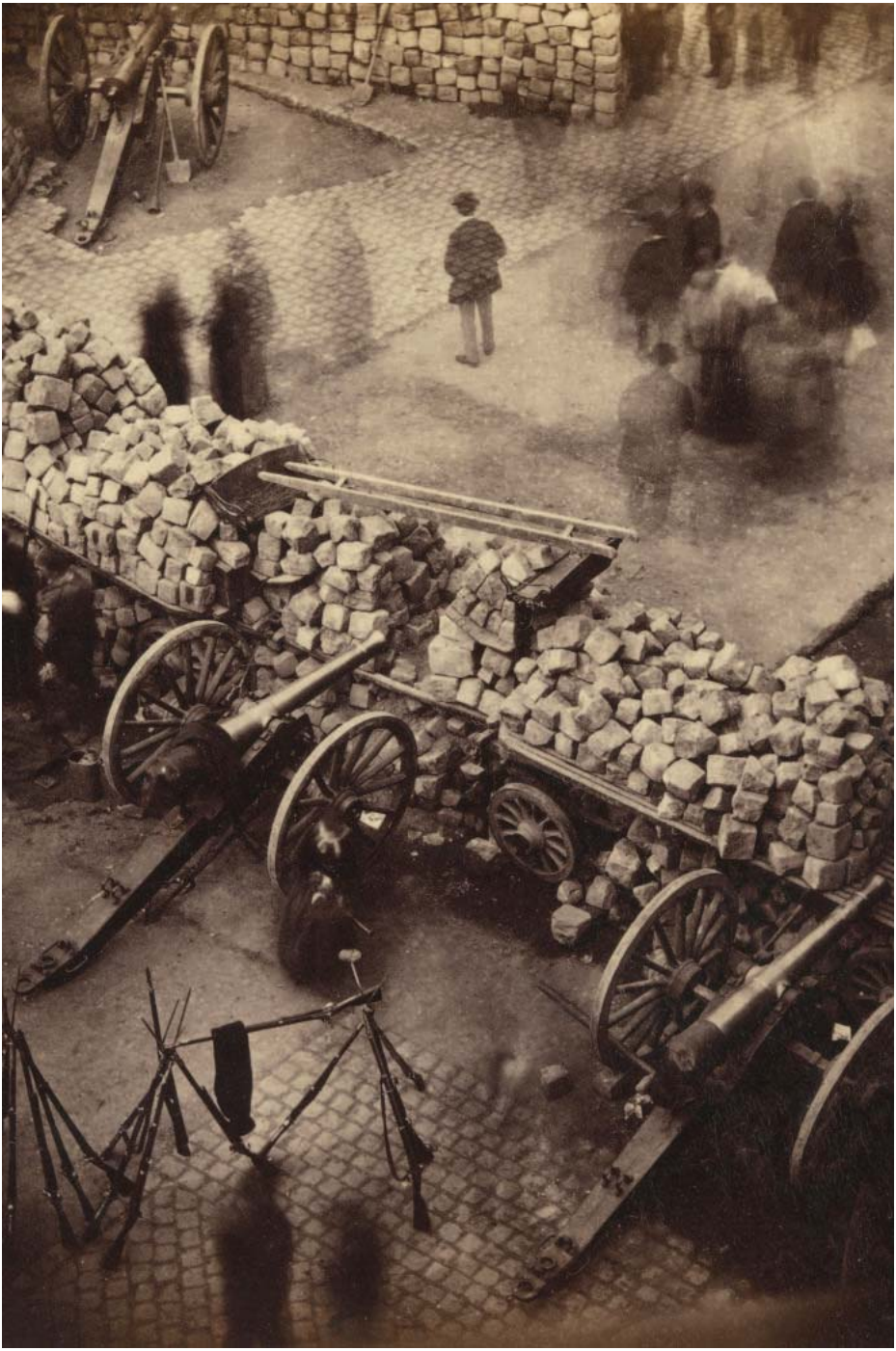
Federici

Benjamin

Marx

Korsch

Bernes



What's it to us, my heart?

What's it to us, my heart, but blankets of blood
And of coalfire, a thousand murders, endless
Howls of rage, and wails of hell-pits disclosing
All order; and North-wind playing still on the debris;
But vengeance? Never! And yet we crave it.
Industrialists, princes, senators: die!
Power, justice, history: kneel! We're due,
Due blood. Blood, and golden flames.
All in for war, for vengeance, for terror
My soul! We writhe in its Bite: O! pass away
Republics of this world! Emperors,
Regiments, colonists, peoples. Enough already.
Who will rouse these whirlwinds of frenzied fire
If not us, and those we call our brothers?
It's our turn! Giddy friends, our fun begins.
O floods of fire, we'll never work
Europe, Asia, America, vanish. Our march
Of vengeance has occupied everything
Cities and the countryside! – We'll be wiped out!
Volcanoes erupt and Oceans boil…
Oh! My friends! – My heart, it's sure, they are brothers:
Shadowed strangers, if we were to leave! So let's go!
Let's go!
O misfortune! I'm trembling and this old earth on me
Who is more and more yours – the earth melts,
It's nothing! I am here! I am here always!

—Arthur Rimbaud, 1872

Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*

Chapter XXV : Paris on the Eve of Death

The Paris of the Commune has but three days more to live; let us engrave upon our memory her luminous physiognomy.

He who has breathed in thy life that fiery fever of modern history, who has panted on thy boulevards and wept in thy faubourgs, who has sung to the morning of thy revolutions and a few weeks after bathed his hands in powder behind thy barricades, he who can hear from beneath thy stones the voices of the martyrs of sublime ideas and read in every one of thy streets a date of human progress, even he does less justice to thy original grandeur than the stranger, though a Philistine, who came to glance at thee during the days of the Commune. The attraction of rebellious Paris was so strong that men hurried thither from America to behold this spectacle unprecedented in the world's history - the greatest town of the European continent in the hands of the proletarians. Even the pusillanimous were drawn towards her.

In the kiosques are the caricatures. Thiers, Picard, and Jules Favre figure as the Three Graces, clasping each other's paunches. This fine fish, the mackerel, with the blue-green scales, who is making up a bed with an imperial crown, is the Marquis de Gallifet. *L'Avenir,* the mouthpiece of the *Ligue, Le Siècle,* become very hostile since the arrest of Gustave Chaudey; and *La Vérité,* the Yankee Portalis's paper, are piled up, melancholy and intact. Many reactionary papers have been suppressed by the prefecture, but for all that are not dead; for a lad, without any mystery about him, offers them to us....

We descend the Rue de Rivoli. On the right, in the Rue Castiglione, a huge barricade obstructs the entrance of the Place Vendôme.

The issue of the Place de la Concorde is barred by the St. Florentin redoubt, stretching to the Ministry of Marine on its right, and the garden of the Tuileries on its left, with three rather badly directed embrasures eight yards wide. An enormous ditch, laying bare all the arteries of subterranean life, separates the Place from the redoubt. The workmen are giving it the finishing stroke, and cover the banks with turf. Many people walking by look on inquisitively, and more than one brow lowers. A corridor skilfully constructed conducts us to the Place de la Concorde. The proud profile of the Strasbourg statue stands out against the red flags. The Communards, who are accused of ignoring France, have piously replaced the faded crowns of the first siege by fresh spring flowers.

Every step towards La Muette is a challenge to death. But our friend must witness all the greatness of Paris. On the ramparts, near the gate of La Muette, an officer is waving his képi toward the Bois de Boulogne; the balls are whistling around him. It is Dombrowski, who amusing himself with inveighing against the Versaillese of the trenches. A member of the Council who is with him succeeds in making him forego this musketeer foolhardiness, and the general takes us to the castle, where he has established one of his headquarters. All the rooms are perforated by shells. Still he remains there, and makes his men remain. It has been calculated that his aides-de-camp on an average lived eight days. At this moment the watch of the Belvedere rushes in with appalled countenance; a shell has traversed his post. 'Stay there,' says Dombrowski to him; 'if you are not destined to die there you have nothing to fear.' Such was his courage — all fatalism. He received no reinforcements despite his despatches to the War Office; believed the game lost, and said so but too often.

A clear sky, a bright sun, peaceful silence envelop this stream, this wreck, these scattered shells. Death appears more cruel amidst the serenity of nature. Let us go and salute our wounded at Passy. A member of the Council, Lefrançais, is visiting the ambulance of Dr.

Demarquay, whom he questions as to the state of the wounded. 'I do not share your opinions,' answers the doctor, 'and I cannot desire the triumph of your cause; but I have never seen wounded men preserve more calm and sang-froid during operations. I attribute this courage to the energy of their convictions.' We then visit the beds; most of the sick anxiously inquire when they will be able to resume their service. A young fellow of eighteen, whose right hand had just been amputated, holds out the other, exclaiming, 'I have still this one for the service of the Commune!' An officer, mortally wounded, is told that the Commune has just handed over his pay to his wife and children. 'I had no right to it,' answers he. 'These, my friend, these are the brutish drunkards who, according to Versailles, form the army of the Commune....

One o'clock in the morning. Paris sleeps tranquilly. Such, my friend, is the Paris of the brigand. You have seen this Paris thinking, weeping, combating, working, enthusiastic, fraternal, severe to vice. Her streets free during the day, are they less safe in the silence of the night? Since Paris has her own police crime has disappeared. Each one is left to his instincts, and where do you see debauchery victorious? These Federals, who might draw milliards, live on ridiculous pay compared with their usual salaries. Do you at last recognize this Paris, seven times shot down since 1789, and always ready to rise for the salvation of France? Where is her programme, say you? Why, seek it before you, and not at the faltering Hôtel-de-Ville. These smoking ramparts, these explosions of heroism, these women, these men of all professions united, all the workmen of the earth applauding our combat, all monarchs, all the bourgeois coalesced against us, do they not speak loudly enough our common thought, and that all of us are fighting for equality, the enfranchisement of labour, the advent of a social society? Woe to France if she does not comprehend! Leave at once; recount what Paris is. If she dies, what life remains to you? Who, save Paris, will have strength enough to continue the Revolution? Who save Paris will stifle the clerical monster? Go, tell the Republican provinces,

'These proletarians fight for you too, who perhaps may be the exiles of to-morrow.' As to that class, the purveyor of empires, that fancies it can govern by periodical butcheries, go and tell them, in accents loud enough to drown their clamours, 'The blood of the people will enrich the revolutionary field. The idea of Paris will arise from her burning entrails and become an inexorable firebrand with the sons of the slaughtered.'

Chapter XXIX: On the Barricades

...They were taken to the exercise-ground. Darboy stammered out, 'I am not the enemy of the Commune. I have done all I could. I have written twice to Versailles.' He recovered a little when he saw death was inevitable. Bonjean could not keep on his legs. 'Who condemns us?' said he. 'The justice of the people.' '0h, this is not the right one,' replied the president. One of the priests threw himself against the sentry-box and uncovered his breast. They were led further on, and, turning a corner, — met the firing-party. Some men harangued them; the delegate at once ordered silence. The hostages placed themselves against the wall, and the officer of the platoon said to them, 'It is not we whom you must accuse of your death, but the Versaillese, who are shooting the prisoners.' He then gave the signal and the guns were fired. The hostages fell back in one line, at an equal distance from each other. Darboy alone remained standing, wounded in the head, one hand raised. A second volley laid him by the side of the others.

The blind justice of revolutions punishes in the first-comers the accumulated crimes of their caste.

(1874)

This disquiet that had been spreading could no longer be denied, the security of the nobles was undermined, no prayers or parades could wring devotion from the populace. The torturers were still raging, and the dungeons still filling up with any people arbitrarily suspected of dissatisfaction. But the whereabouts of the real prisoners were shown one morning, before sunrise, when Heracles arrived in Thebes, accompanied by a gigantic hound, at whose howling all those who had a solid house crept under their beds, while those in the shacks and those who slept outdoors pricked up their ears and dashed toward Heracles as if called by a cheery trumpet. The guardian of infernal order, who had been depicted as unassailable since time immemorial, had been pulled out of the earthly depths by Heracles, easily, with a song...and in the market place, which had been abandoned by the warriors of the upper ranks, he showed the maids, the farmhands, the craftsmen and the day laborers, and the loitering rank and file... They saw what scabby legs had propped up the reign of fraud and lies.

Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance.*



Louise Michel

First Trial

**PROCEEDINGS FROM *LA GAZETTE DES TRIBUNAUX*.
6TH MILITARY TRIBUNAL (*SEAT OF VERSAILLES*).
M. DELAPORTE PRESIDING, COLONEL OF THE 12TH CAVALRY**

Hearing of December 16, 1871.

[...] *The court clerk, M. Duplan, reads the following report:*

It is in 1870, on the occasion of the death of Victor Noir, that Louise Michel began to express her revolutionary ideas.

An unknown school teacher with few students, it was not possible for us to know what her connections were and what part she played in the precursory events of the monstrous assault that terrified our unfortunate country.

It is unnecessary, certainly, to retrace in their entirety the incidents of March 18, and as point of departure of the accusation, we will limit ourselves to clarifying the part taken by Louise Michel in the bloody tragedy of which the Buttes-Montmartre and the rue des Rosiers were the theater. The accomplice in the arrest of the unfortunate generals Lecomte and Clement Thomas was afraid of seeing the two victims escape. "Don't let them go!" she cried with all her might to the wretches who surrounded them.

And later, when the murder had been carried out, in the presence, so to speak, of the mutilated corpses, she showed her complete joy at the spilled blood and dared to proclaim, "It serves them right." Then, beaming and satisfied with the good day, she goes to Belleville and to the Villette, to

make sure “that the neighborhood remained armed.”

She returns home the 19th, after having taken the precaution of shedding the federate uniform that could compromise her. But she feels the need to chat a bit about the events with her doorman.

“Ah!” she cries, “if Clemenceau had gotten to rue des Rosiers a few moments earlier, they wouldn’t have shot the generals, because he was against it, being on the side of the Versaillais.”

At last, “the hour of the coming of the people has sounded.” Paris, in the power of the foreigner and the scoundrels rushing in from all corners of the world, declares the Commune. As secretary of the society known for the “Improvement of Working

Women through Work,” Louise Michel organizes the famous Central Committee of the Union of Women, as well as the vigilance committees responsible for recruiting paramedics and, at the final moment, working women for the barricades, perhaps even arsonists.

A copy of the manifesto found at the town hall of the 10th arrondissement reveals the role played by her in the aforementioned committees dur- ing the final days of the conflict. We reproduce verbatim this written work:

“In the name of the social revolution that we hail, in the name of the demand of the rights of work, equality, and justice, the Union of Women for the Defense of Paris and Care of the Wounded opposes with all its might the outrageous proclamation to the citizens, made public the day before yesterday by a group of reactionaries.

“Said proclamation holds that the women of Paris call on the generosity of Versailles and demand peace at all costs.

“No, it is not peace, but war to the death that the working women of Paris demand.

“Today conciliation would be treason. It would be to renounce all the

working women's aspirations demanding absolute social renewal, the annihilation of all currently existing legal and social relations, the abolition of all privilege, every exploitation, the substitution of the reign of work for that of capital, in a word, the emancipation of the worker by the worker!

"Six months of suffering and betrayal during the siege, six weeks of immense struggles against the allied exploiters, the waves of blood poured out for the cause of liberty, these are our titles of glory and vengeance!

"The current struggle can only have as its outcome the triumph of the people's cause ... Paris will not shrink back, for it carries the flag of the future. The final hour has come! Make way for the workers! To the back with their torturers! Action! Energy!

"The tree of liberty grows, watered with the blood of its enemies! ...

"All united and unwavering, raised and enlightened by the suffering that the social crises carried in their wake, deeply convinced that the Commune, representing the international and revolutionary principles of the people, carries within it the seeds of social revolution, the women of Paris will prove to France and to the world that they too will know, at the moment of utmost danger, at the barricades, on the ramparts of Paris, if the reaction would force the gates, how to give, like their brothers, their blood and their life for the defense and the triumph of the Commune, that is to say of the people! Thus victorious, even unto uniting themselves and understanding each other's common interests, working men and working women, all in solidarity by a last effort..." (This final sentence remained incomplete). "Long live the universal Republic! Long live the Commune!"

Including the jobs mentioned previously, Louise Michel directed a school at 24, rue Oudot. There, from her lectern, she professed, in her rare leisure time, the doctrines of free-thinking and sang to her young students the poetry fallen from her pen, among others the song entitled "The Avengers."

President of the Revolutionary Club, held at the church of Saint- Bernard, Louise Michel is responsible for the vote delivered during the session of May 18 (21 Floreal year LXXIX), and having for objective:

"The abolition of the magistrature, the obliteration of the Legal Codes, their replacement by a committee of justice;

"The abolition of religions, the immediate arrest of priests, the sale of their goods and that of the deserters and traitors who supported the wretches of Versailles;

"The execution of one important hostage every twenty-four hours until the release and arrival in Paris of Citizen Blanqui, appointed member of the Commune."

It wasn't enough, however, for this "ardent soul," as the author of an imaginative account that figures in the dossier likes to characterize her, to rouse the populace, applaud murder, corrupt children, preach fratricidal struggle, in a word to encourage all crimes; it was still necessary to lead by example and put herself on the line!

We also find her at Issy, at Clamart, and Montmartre, fighting at the front lines, firing gunshots or rallying the deserters.

Le Cri du peuple affirms as much in its April 14 edition:

"Citizen Louise Michel, who fought valiantly at Moulineaux, was injured at the fort of Issy."

Very fortunately for her, we hasten to acknowledge, Jules Vallès' heroine got out of that brilliant affair with a simple sprain.

What is the motive that pushed Louise Michel onto the fatal road of politics and revolution?

It is clearly vanity.

Illegitimate daughter raised by charity, instead of thanking Providence for

having given her a superior education and the means to live happily with her mother, she indulges her fanatical imagination, her short- tempered nature and, after having broken with her benefactors, she rushes off for adventure in Paris.

The wind of Revolution begins to blow: Victor Noir has just died.

It's the moment to enter onto the scene. But Louise Michel is loath to play the role of cohort; her name must grab the public's attention and appear on the first line of misleading proclamations and posters.

Nothing remains for us but to give legal classification to the acts committed by this maniac since the beginning of the hellish crisis that France has just gone through until the end of the ungodly combat in which she took part among the tombs of the Montmartre cemetery.

She knowingly aided the culprits who arrested generals Lecomte and Clement Thomas in the acts perpetrated, and this arrest was followed by the bodily torture and death of these two unfortunate men.

Intimately linked with the members of the Commune, she knew all their plans in advance. She aided them with all her strength and with all her will. What is more, she aided them and often went beyond them. She offered to go to Versailles and assassinate the President of the Republic, in order to terrify the Assembly and, according to her, bring an end to the struggle.

She is as guilty as "Ferré the proud Republican," whom she defends in such a bizarre manner, and whose head, to use her expression, "is a challenge thrown to your consciences and the answer a revolution."

She excited the passions of the masses, preached war without mercy or rest and, a she-wolf hungry for blood, caused the deaths of the hostages through her diabolical plots.

Consequently, it is our opinion that there are grounds for bringing Louise Michel to trial for: 1. An offense, having as its goal the overthrow of the government; 2. An offense, having as its goal civil war in encouraging

the citizens to

arm themselves against each other; 3. For having, in an insurrectionary action, openly carried weapons and worn a military uniform, and made use of those weapons; 4. Forgery of private writing through impersonation; 5. Use of a false document; 6. Complicity through provocation and plotting the of assassination of

persons held as hostages by the Commune; 7. Complicity in illegal arrests, followed by bodily torture and death, in

knowingly assisting the culprits of the deed in the acts they carried out. These crimes are provided for in articles 87, 91, 150, 151, 59, 60, 302, 341, 344 of the Penal Code and article 5 of the Law of May 24, 1834.

Interrogation of the Defendant

Judge: You have heard the acts of which you are accused. What do you have to say in your defense?

Defendant: I don't want to defend myself. I don't want to be defended. I belong entirely to the social revolution, and I declare that I accept responsibility for all my actions. I accept it completely and without qualification. You accuse me of being involved in the killing of the generals? To that, I would answer yes, if I had found myself in Montmartre when they wanted to fire on the people; I would not have hesitated to fire on those who gave orders like those; but as soon as they were prisoners, I don't understand why they were shot, and I consider that act as one of remarkable cowardice!

As for the burning of Paris, yes, I participated in it. I wanted to put up a barrier of flames to the invaders of Versailles. I had no accomplices, I acted on my own.

You also say that I am an accomplice of the Commune! Of course I am, since the Commune wanted social revolution above all, and social revolution is my dearest wish. What is more, I am honored to be counted among the promoters of the Commune which, in any case, was absolutely

not, absolutely not involved, as you well know, with the assassinations and the burnings: I attended all of the meetings at the Hôtel de Ville, and I affirm that there was never any question of assassination or burning. Do you want to know who the real culprits are? The police. Later, perhaps, light will shine on these events for which it is today so natural for us to blame all the partisans of social revolution.

One day, I proposed to Ferré an invasion of the Assembly. I wanted two victims, M. Thiers and myself, because I had made the sacrifice of my life, and I had decided to strike him down.

Judge: In a proclamation, you said that every twenty-four hours a hostage should be shot?

Answer: No, I only wanted to threaten. But why would I defend myself? I've already told you I refuse to do it. You are the men who are going to judge me; you're in front of me openly; you are men, and I, I am only a woman. And yet I look you straight in the face. I know very well that any- thing I tell you will not change my sentence in the slightest. Thus I have a single and final word before I sit down. We have never wanted anything but the triumph of the principles of the Revolution. I swear to it by our martyrs fallen on the field of Satory, by our martyrs I still acclaim openly here, and who will someday find an avenger.

Once again, I belong to you; do with me as you please. Take my life if you want it. I am not a woman who would dispute your wishes a single instant.

Judge: You declare that you did not approve of the assassination of the generals, and yet people say that, when you learned of it, you shouted, "They shot them. It serves them right."

A: Yes, I said that, I admit it. (I even recall that it was in the presence of citizens Le Moussu and Ferré.)

Q: So you approved of the assassination?

A: If I may, what I said is not proof. The words that I spoke aimed at

encouraging the revolutionary impulse.

Q: You also wrote in newspapers. In Le Cri du peuple, for example?

A: Yes, I don't hide it.

Q: Every day these newspapers called for the confiscation of the clergy's property and other similar revolutionary measures. Such were your opinions, then?

A: Of course. But note that we had never wanted to take those goods for ourselves. We thought only to give them to the people for their well-being.

Q: You called for the abolition of the magistrature?

A: Because I always had in front of me examples of its errors. I remember the Lesurques affair and so many others.

Q: You acknowledge wanting to assassinate M. Thiers?

A: Certainly... I said it already and I say it again.

Q: It seems that you wore various costumes during the Commune.

A: I dressed as usual. I added only a red sash to my clothing.

Q: Didn't you wear men's clothing several times?

A: A single time: it was March 18th. I dressed as a National Guardsman, so I wouldn't attract attention.

Few witnesses were summoned, as Louise Michel did not dispute the actions with which she was charged.

Mme. Poulain, shopkeeper, was the first to be heard. **Judge:** You know the accused? You know what her political ideas were?

A: Yes, monsieur le Président, and she didn't hide them. Quite fanatical,

we always saw her in the clubs. She wrote in the newspapers.

Q: You heard her say, with regards to the killing of the generals, "It serves them right"?

A: Yes, monsieur le Président.

Louise Michel: But I already admitted the fact, it's pointless for the witnesses to attest to it. Mme. Botin, painter.

Judge: Did Louise Michel inform on one of your brothers in order to force him to serve in the National Guard?

A: Yes, monsieur le Président.

Louise Michel: The witness had a brother, I thought him brave and I wanted him to serve the Commune.

Judge (to the witness): One day you saw the accused riding in a carriage strolling among the guards and saluting them like a queen, according to your expression?

A: Yes, monsieur le Président.

Louise Michel: But that can't be true, for I could never desire to imitate those queens, all of whom I want to see decapitated like Marie-Antoinette. The truth is that I was quite simply riding in a carriage because I suffered from a sprain that resulted from a fall that happened at Issy.

Mme. Pompon, doorkeeper, repeated everything that was in the defendant's account. Louise Michel was known as a fanatic.

Cécile Denéziat, no occupation, knew the defendant well.

Judge: You saw the accused dressed as a National Guardsman?

A: Yes, once, around March 17th.

Q: Was she carrying a rifle?

A: I said she was, but I don't recall this fact well.

Q: You saw her riding in a carriage among the National Guardsmen?

A: Yes, monsieur le Président, but I don't recall the details of this act very well.

Q: You have also said before that you think she was at the forefront when Clément Thomas and Lecomte were assassinated?

A: I can only repeat what I heard people say around me. Captain Dailly takes the floor. He requests that the council remove the accused from society, for whom she is a continual danger. He drops the charges on all counts, except that of carrying open or concealed weapons in an insurrectionary movement.

Maître Haussmann, who spoke next, declared that because of the formal wish of the accused not to be defended, he would simply rely on the wisdom of the council.

Judge: Accused, do you have something to say in your defense?

Louise Michel: What I demand from you, you who claim to be the war council, who present yourselves as my judges, who do not hide like the Board of Pardons, from you who are military men and who judge me openly, it is the field of Satory that I demand, where our brothers have already fallen.

I must be removed from society; that's what you've been told to do. Well, the prosecutor is right! Since it seems that every heart that beats for freedom has no right to anything but a bit of lead, I demand my share! If you let me live, I will never cease crying out for vengeance, and I will denounce the assassins of the Board of Pardons to the vengeance of my brothers...

Judge: I cannot let you speak if you continue in that tone.

Louise Michel: I'm finished... If you are not cowards, kill me...

After these words, which caused a great stir in the audience, the council withdraws to deliberate. After a few minutes it returned in session, and, at the end of the verdict, Louise Michel is unanimously sentenced to deportation to a fortified place.

Louise Michel was led back in and informed of the verdict. When the clerk told her that she had twenty-four hours to apply for judicial review, she cried, “No! There is nothing to appeal. But I should prefer death!”



Theses on the Paris Commune

THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL

"The classical workers movement must be reexamined without any illusions, particularly without any illusions regarding its various political and pseudo-theoretical heirs, because all they have inherited is its failure. The apparent successes of this movement are actually its fundamental failures (reformism or the establishment of a state bureaucracy), while its failures (the Paris Commune or the 1934 Asturian revolt) are its most promising successes so far, for us and for the future" (*Internationale Situationniste* #7).

2

The Commune was the biggest festival of the nineteenth century. Underlying the events of that spring of 1871 one can see the insurgents' feeling that they had become the masters of their own history, not so much on the level of "governmental" politics as on the level of their everyday life. (Consider, for example, the *games* everyone played with their weapons: they were in fact playing with power.) It is *also* in this sense that Marx should be understood when he says that "the most important social measure of the Commune was its own existence in acts."

3

Engels's remark, "Look at the Paris Commune — *that* was the dictatorship of the proletariat," should be taken seriously in order to reveal what the dictatorship of the proletariat is not (the various forms of state dictatorship over the proletariat in the name of the proletariat).

4

It has been easy to make justified criticisms of the Commune's obvious lack of a *coherent organizational structure*. But as the problem of political structures seems far more complex to us today than the would-be heirs of

the Bolshevik-type structure claim it to be, it is time that we examine the Commune not just as an outmoded example of revolutionary primitivism, all of whose mistakes can easily be overcome, but as a positive experiment whose whole truth has yet to be rediscovered and fulfilled.

5

The Commune had no leaders. And this at a time when the idea of the necessity of leaders was universally accepted in the workers movement. This is the first reason for its paradoxical successes and failures. The official organizers of the Commune were incompetent (compared with Marx or Lenin, or even Blanqui). But on the other hand, the various "irresponsible" acts of that moment are precisely what is needed for the continuation of the revolutionary movement of our own time (even if the circumstances restricted almost all those acts to the purely destructive level — the most famous example being the rebel who, when a suspect bourgeois insisted that he had never had anything to do with politics, replied, "That's precisely why I'm going to kill you").

6

The vital importance of the general arming of the people was manifested practically and symbolically from the beginning to the end of the movement. By and large the right to impose popular will by force was not surrendered and left to any specialized detachments. This exemplary autonomy of the armed groups had its unfortunate flip side in their lack of coordination: at no point in the offensive or defensive struggle against Versailles did the people's forces attain military effectiveness. It should be borne in mind, however, that the Spanish revolution was lost — as, in the final analysis, was the civil war itself — in the name of such a transformation into a "republican army." The contradiction between autonomy and coordination would seem to have been largely related to the technological level of the period.

7

The Commune represents *the only implementation of a revolutionary urbanism* to date — attacking on the spot the petrified signs of the dominant organization of life, understanding social space in political terms, refusing to accept the innocence of any monument. Anyone who disparages this attack as some "lumpenproletarian nihilism," some "irresponsibility of the *pétroleuses,*"[1] should specify what he believes to be of positive value in the present society and worth preserving (it will turn out to be almost everything). "All space is already occupied by the enemy. . . . Authentic urbanism will appear when the absence of this occupation is created in certain zones. What we call construction starts there. It can be clarified by the *positive void* concept developed by modern physics" ("Basic Program of Unitary Urbanism", *Internationale Situationniste* #6).

8

The Paris Commune succumbed less to the force of arms than to the force of habit. The most scandalous practical example was the refusal to use the cannons to seize the French National Bank when money was so desperately needed. During the entire existence of the Commune the bank remained a Versaillese enclave in Paris, defended by nothing more than a few rifles and the mystique of property and theft. The other ideological habits proved in every respect equally disastrous (the resurrection of Jacobinism, the defeatist strategy of barricades in memory of 1848, etc.).

9

The Commune shows how those who defend the old world always benefit in one way or another from the complicity of revolutionaries — particularly of those revolutionaries who merely *think about* revolution, and who turn out to still *think like* the defenders. In this way the old world retains bases (ideology, language, customs, tastes) among its enemies, and uses them to reconquer the terrain it has lost. (Only the thought-in-acts

1 "Pétroleuses": Communard women who were rumored to have burned down many Parisian buildings during the final days of the Commune by throwing bottles of petroleum.

natural to the revolutionary proletariat escapes it irrevocably: the Tax Bureau went up in flames.) The real "fifth column" is in the very minds of revolutionaries.

10

The story of the arsonists who during the final days of the Commune went to destroy Notre-Dame, only to find it defended by an armed battalion of Commune artists, is a richly provocative example of direct democracy. It gives an idea of the kind of problems that will need to be resolved in the perspective of the power of the councils. Were those artists right to defend a cathedral in the name of eternal aesthetic values — and in the final analysis, in the name of museum culture — while other people wanted to express themselves then and there by making this destruction symbolize their absolute defiance of a society that, in its moment of triumph, was about to consign their entire lives to silence and oblivion? The artist partisans of the Commune, acting as specialists, already found themselves in conflict with an extremist form of struggle against alienation. The Communards must be criticized for not having dared to answer the totalitarian terror of power with the use of the totality of their weapons. Everything indicates that the poets who at that moment actually expressed the Commune's inherent poetry were simply *wiped out*. The Commune's mass of unaccomplished acts enabled its tentative actions to be turned into "atrocities" and their memory to be censored. Saint-Just's remark, "Those who make revolution half way only dig their own graves," also explains his *own* silence.[2]

11

Theoreticians who examine the history of this movement from a divinely omniscient viewpoint (like that found in classical novels) can easily demonstrate that the Commune was objectively doomed to failure and could not have been successfully consummated. They forget that for those who really lived it, the consummation was *already there*.

2 Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just, one of the Jacobin leaders during the French Revolution, was executed along with Robespierre in 1794.

12

The audacity and inventiveness of the Commune must obviously be measured not in relation to our time, but in terms of the political, intellectual and moral attitudes of its own time, in terms of the *solidarity* of all the common assumptions that it blasted to pieces. The profound solidarity of presently prevailing assumptions (right and left) gives us an idea of the inventiveness we can expect of a comparable explosion today.

13

The social war of which the Commune was one episode is still being fought today (though its superficial conditions have changed considerably). In the task of "making conscious the unconscious tendencies of the Commune" (Engels), the last word has yet to be said.

14

For almost twenty years in France the Stalinists and the leftist Christians have agreed, in memory of their anti-German national front, to stress the element of national disarray and offended patriotism in the Commune. (According to the current Stalinist line, "the French people petitioned to be better governed" and were finally driven to desperate measures by the treachery of the unpatriotic right wing of the bourgeoisie.) In order to refute this pious nonsense it would suffice to consider the role played by all the foreigners who came to fight for the Commune. As Marx said, the Commune was the inevitable battle, the climax of 23 years of struggle in Europe by "our party."

GUY DEBORD, ATTILA KOTÁNYI, RAOUL VANEIGEM, 18 March 1962



The rue de Rivoli after the fights and the fires of the Paris Commmune

Benjamin thought the poet with the most immediate affinities with Blanqui was Baudelaire. The conspiratorial cells that Blanqui operated in, according to Benjamin, were closer to the bohemia of Baudelaire, closer to poets and criminal weirdos than to the organised working class. A more accurate affinity, however, would be with Rimbaud, who more than any other could be called the poet of the Commune. Rimbaud's 'logical derangement of all the senses' is a theorisation of the convulsions in collective subjectivity set off by the experience of the Commune. The senses are not the privatised senses of the official world, Bohemian or otherwise, but a collectivity that runs outward into a revolutionary sensory system that itself reaches backwards and forwards into time, upending capitalist temporality. The young Marx, famously, wrote that 'the forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present', and so, for Rimbaud, the task of poetic labour is to suggest methods to bring about the derangement of the 'entire history of the world'.

"'L'Orgie Parisienne' is one of Rimbaud's great poems relating to the Commune. In it, he imagines the bourgeoisie re-entering the city following the final massacres of the Communards. They are a parade of insipid and wretched grotesques: 'hip wrigglers', 'puppets', 'panting idiots' with 'hearts of filth' and 'terrifying mouths'. They drink themselves senseless, ignoring the traces of the Commune all around them, the boarded up shops with 'Business as Usual' pasted onto them, the stink of gasoline and liberty and blood. But for Rimbaud the city itself is a slaughtered Communard, and the wounds and the scars that the Commune and its violent suppression has left criss-crossed all over it like a counter-street-map are a 'thousand doors' through which the past and future come tumbling, splitting the city apart so that

it is made to exist on a thousand different sensory dimensions, thus keeping the idea and possibility of proletarian triumph forever present, no matter how ghostly. The Commune has even in defeat transformed the city, and 'the sobs of the infamous / the hate of the convicts / the clamour of the damned', that is the voices of the victims of massacre, the real negative content of the satisfied yelps of the bourgeoisie, will always be audible, echoing again and again throughout future and past history in a counter-time to the parched orbits of capital's realism and 'thought devoid of eyes, of teeth, of ears, of everything'."

Sean Bonney, "Comets & Barricades: Insurrectionary Imagination In Exile"


EN GREVE
JUSQU'A LA
RETRAITE

On the eve of the proclamation of the [Paris] Commune, [Adolphe] Thiers took Louis Auguste Blanqui away. He kept Blanqui in secret and refused to exchange him for sixty-four hostages, including the Archbishop of Paris. Flotte recounts this remark by Thiers: "To bring Blanqui to the insurrection is to send him a force equal to an armed corps." Blanqui is feared, and even in his own party, not as a leader, but as power. He knows how to show his abilities in [both] action and thought, and to practice them together. One need search no further for the origin of the implacable hatred and the unfailing loyalty that Blanqui inspired. "The tribunes compare [s'addresser] the heroic and barbaric beastliness of the multitudes to a wild bearing, the lion's face, Taurus' neck. As for Blanqui, the cold mathematician of revolt and reprisals, he seems to hold between his thin fingers the tally [le devis] of the sorrows and rights of the people" (Valles, L'Insurge). Blanqui addressed himself to justice and determination; he addressed himself to his equals. Unlike a leader, he neither flattered nor snubbed anyone, and he preferred to keep people at a distance than to take the risk of [mutual] seduction. By his very existence, he contradicted all the bourgeoisie's propaganda, which -- before turning insurgent Parisian proletarians into piles of cadavers as tall as barricades -- began by painting them as a shapeless mass, as a brainless Plebian class of thieves, drunks, prison-escapees, headless devils, creatures that were unintelligible, monstrous and foreign to all humanity. And so: there is a logic of revolt. There is a science of insurrection. There is an intelligence in the riot, an idea of upheaval. It is necessary to have all the class-hatred of de Tocqueville to fail to recognize it. [...]

Dionys Mascolo said something about Saint-Just that is also worthy of Blanqui: "Saint-Just's 'inhumanity' lay in the fact that he didn't have several distinct lives, like other men, but a single one."

The custom among human beings is to let life go by. The hand on the shoulder that says, "Go, have no cares, it will pass," is the best-known carrier of this sickness. Thus, 'inhuman' is the one who devotes herself to the highest intensity she has encountered like a truth. The one who does not oppose herself to the shock, to the motion of experience, the hesitations of bad faith, skepticism and comfort. She becomes a force in her turn. A little discipline, and this force -- the force that attaches her to this intensity -- will successfully organize the maelstrom of attractions that compose all of us and imprint upon them a unique direction. What spectators stupidly call "will" is instead an unreserved abandon." [...]

"December 2006.[1] *The ship of state is taking on water everywhere*. Soon it will only be a look-out post. France burns and shipwrecks. This is good. It revives memories. The schools on fire burn in memory of the generations of proletarians who therein experienced the bitter taste of timetables, work and obedience, and incorporated the feeling of complete inferiority. Those who no longer vote honor the insurgents of June 1848 -- that "revolt by rebellious angels who have not arisen since then" (Coeurderoy) -- whom one put to the bayonet in the name of universal suffrage. The leftist intellectuals [of today] wonder on the radio if the government has the courage to send the army into the banlieus, just as their ancestors [who in the early 1960s] applauded the generals who, upon returning from Algeria, massacred Parisian proletarians, though the generals had gotten into the habit of "civilizing" the indigenous people [of that country]. Today as yesterday, this species of skunk calls himself republican and speaks of "the rabble." The imprisoned members of Action Directe have long ago surpassed their mandatory-minimum ntences. Regis Schleicher soon will compete with Blanqui for length of incarceration. More than ever, the army trains

for urban warfare. In France, the historical clock is stuck at May 1871. The question of communism is invisibly the only question that haunts all social relations, even porn. The universe fidgets in place. Last March 31st, a wild demonstration of 4,000 people lasts more than eight hours: from the intervention of the president of this senile Republic -- he came on TV to announce that the CPE would be maintained -- to four o'clock in the morning. The demonstration wants to go to the Eylsee, oblique to la Concorde sur l'Assemblee national, which it fails to approach [investir] due to lack of materials and weapons -- same thing for the Senate.

At the edges of the march, determination grows. A martial scansion is heard at the door: "Paris! Get up, wake up!" It is an order. On the Boulevard de Sebastopol, then at de Magenta, the windows of the banks and interim-job agencies begin to fall, one after the other, methodically. Prostitutes at Pigalle salute from a window. The crowd mounts le Sacre-Coeur to cries of "Vive la Commune!" The door to the crypt does not budge; what a shame, one could have burnt it down. Descending to a small street, a lady in a baby-doll outfit leans on her third-floor balcony and yells at the top of her voice, "The bad days will end." The permanently-open office of the vile Pierre Lellouche will soon be sacked. It is three o'clock in the morning. The past does not pass. The burning of Paris will be the worthy completion of Baron Haussmann's destruction."

Tiqqun, "To a Friend"

"By the 18th century the European intelligentsia even began to take pride in its acquired enlightenment, and confidently proceeded to rewrite the history of the witch-hunt, dismissing it as a product of medieval superstition.

Yet the specter of the witches continued to haunt the imagination of the ruling class. In 1871, the Parisian bourgeoisie instinctively returned to it to demonize the female Communards, accusing them of wanting to set Paris aflame. There can be little doubt, in fact, that the models for the lurid tales and images used by the bourgeois press to create the myth of the petroleuses were drawn from the repertoire of the witch- hunt. As described by Edith Thomas, the enemies of the Commune claimed that thousands of proletarian women roamed (like witches) the city, day and night, with pots full of kerosene and stickers with the notation "B.P.B." ("bon pour bruler," good for torching"), presumably following instructions given to them, as part of a great conspiracy to reduce Paris to ashes in front of the troops advancing from Versailles. Thomas writes that "petroleuses were to be found everywhere. In the areas occupied by the Versailles army it was enough that a woman be poor and ill-dressed, and that she be carrying a basket, box, or milk-bottle to be suspected". Hundreds of women were thus summarily executed, while the press vilified them in the papers. Like the witch, the petroleuse was depicted as an older woman with a wild, savage look and uncombed hair. In her hands was the container for the liquid she used to perpetrate her crimes."

Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*



La barricade de la place Blanche défendue par des Femmes.

"The true goal of Haussmann's projects was to secure the city against civil war. He wanted to make the erection of barricades in the streets of Paris impossible for all time. With same end in mind, Louis Phillipe had already introduced wooden paving. Nevertheless, barricades had played a considerable role in the February Revolution. Engels studied the tactics of barricade fighting. Haussmann seeks to forestall such combat in two ways. Widening the streets will make the erection of barricades impossible, and new streets will connect the barracks in straight lines with the workers' districts. Contemporaries christened the operation "strategic embellishment."

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project.*

It is a strange fact. In spite of all the tall talk and all the literature, for the last 60 years, about emancipation of labor, no sooner do the working men anywhere take the subject into their own hands with a will, than arises at once all the apologetic phraseology of the mouthpieces of present society with its two poles of capital and wage-slavery (the landlord now is but the sleeping partner of the capitalist), as if the capitalist society was still in its purest state of virgin innocence, with its antagonisms still undeveloped, with its delusions still unexploded, with its prostitute realities not yet laid bare. The Commune, they exclaim, intends to abolish property, the basis of all civilization!

Yes, gentlemen, the Commune intended to abolish that class property which makes the labor of the many the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators. It wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land, and capital, now chiefiy the means of enslaving and exploiting labor, into mere instruments of free and associated labor. But this is communism, "impossible" communism! Why, those members of the ruling classes who are intelligent enough to perceive the impossibility of continuing the present system - and they are many - have become the obtrusive and full-mouthed apostles of co-operative production. If co-operative production is not to remain a sham and a snare; if it is to supersede the capitalist system; if united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon common plan, thus taking it under their own control, and putting an end to the constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of capitalist production - what else, gentlemen, would it be but communism, "possible" communism?

Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*

On the Revolutionary Commune

KARL KORSCH, *1929*.

I

What should every class-conscious worker know about the revolutionary commune in the present historical epoch which has on its agenda the revolutionary self-liberation of the working class from the capitalist yoke? And what is known about it today by even the politically enlightened and therefore self-conscious segment of the proletariat?

There are a few *historical facts*, together with a few appropriate remarks by Marx, Engels, and Lenin, which now after half a century of Social Democratic propaganda prior to the Great War and after the powerful new experiences of the last fifteen years, have already become part and parcel of proletarian consciousness. However, this piece of world history is today mostly dealt with as little in the schools of the "democratic" (Weimar) republic as it was earlier in the schools of the Kaiser's imperial monarchy. I am referring to the history and significance of the glorious Paris Commune, which hoisted the red flag of proletarian revolution on March 18, 1871, and kept it flying for seventy-two days in fierce battles against an onslaught of a well-armed hostile world. This is the revolutionary commune of the Paris workers in 1871 of which Karl Marx said in his *Address to the General Council of the International Workers Association on May 30, 1871, On the Civil War in France*, that its "true secret" lay in the fact that *it was essentially a government of the working classes*, "the result of the struggle by the producing class against the propertied class, the finally discovered political form under which the economic liberation of labor could develop." And it was in this sense that twenty years later, when on the occasion of the founding of the Second International and the creation of *proletarian May Day*

celebrations as the first form of direct international mass action, the propertied classes once again were overcome with holy terror whenever the alarming words "dictatorship of the proletariat" were sounded. Friedrich Engels flung the proud sentences into the faces of the startled philistines: "Well then, gentlemen, would you like to know what this dictatorship looks like? *Look at the Paris Commune. That was the dictatorship of the proletariat*." And then again, more than two decades later, the greatest revolutionary politician of our time, Lenin, analyzed in exact detail the experiences of the Paris Commune and the struggle against the opportunist decline and confusion in regard to the theories of Marx and Engels in the main part of his most important political work *State and Revolution*. And when a few weeks later the Russian Revolution of 1917, which had begun in February as a national and bourgeois revolution, broke through its national and bourgeois barriers and expanded and deepened into the first proletarian world revolution, the masses of West European workers (and the progressive sections of the working class of the whole world), together with Lenin and Trotsky, welcomed this new form of government of the revolutionary "council system" as the direct continuation of the "revolutionary commune" created half a century earlier by the Paris workers.

So far, so good. As unclear as the ideas may have been that bound together the revolutionary workers under the formula "all power to the councils," following that revolutionary period of storm and stress which spread far and wide over Europe after the economic and political upheavals of the four war years; however deep already then the rift may have been between these ideas and that reality which in the new Russia had come to the fore under the name of "Socialist Councils Republic" nonetheless, in that period *the call for councils was a positive form of development of a revolutionary proletarian class will surging toward realization*. Only morose philistines could bewail the vagueness of the councils concept at that time, like every incompletely realized idea, and only lifeless pedants could attempt to alleviate this defect by artificially contrived "systems" like the infamous "little boxes-system" of *Daumig and Richard Muller*. Wherever in those days the proletariat established its revolutionary

class-dictatorship, as happened in Hungary and Bavaria temporarily in 1919, it named and formed its "*government of the working class*"-which was a result *of the struggle by the producing class against the propertied class and whose determined purpose was to accomplish the "economic liberation of labor" - as a revolutionary council government*. And if in those days the proletariat had been victorious in anyone of the bigger industrial countries, perhaps in Germany during the big commercial strikes of spring, 1919, or in the counteraction of the Kapp putsch in 1920, or in the course of the so-called Cunow strike during the Ruhr-occupation and the infiation year of 1923, or in Italy at the time of the occupation of factories in October, 1920-then it would have established its power in the form of a Council Republic and it would have united together with the already existing "Federation of Russian Socialist Soviet Republics" within *a world-federation of revolutionary council republics*.

Under today's conditions, however, the *council concept* has quite another signiflcance, as does the existence of a so-called socialist and *"revolutionary" council government*. Now after the overcoming of the world economic crisis of 1921 and the related defeat of the German, Polish, and Italian workers-and the following chain of further proletarian defeats including the British general strike and miners' strike of 1926 - *European capitalism has commenced a new cycle of its dictatorship on the backs of the defeated working class*. Under these changed objective conditions we, the revolutionary proletarian class-flghters of the whole world, cannot any more hold subjectively onto our old belief, quite unchanged and unexamined, in the revolutionary signiflcance of the council concept and the revolutionary character of *council government* as a direct development of that *political form of the proletarian dictatorship* "discovered" half a century ago by the Paris communardes.

It would be superflcial and false, when looking at the fiagrant *contradictions* existing today between the name and the real condition of the Russian "Union of Socialist Soviet Republics," to satisfy ourselves with the statement that the men in power in present-day Russia "betrayed" that *original "revolutionary" council*

principle, just as in Germany *Scheidemann, Muller, and Leipart* have "betrayed" their "revolutionary" *socialist principles of the dap before the war*. Both claims are true without doubt. The Scheidemanns, Mullers, and Leiparts were traitors to their socialist principles. And in Russia the "dictatorship" exercised today from the highest pinnacle of an extremely exclusive government-party apparatus by means of a million-headed bureaucracy over the proletariat and the whole of Soviet Russi—that only in name is still reminiscent of the "Communist" and "Bolshevik" party—has as little in common with the revolutionary council concept of 1917 and 1918 as the Fascist party dictatorship of the former revolutionary Social Democrat Mussolini in Italy. However, so little is explained in both cases in regard to "betrayal" *that rather the fact of betrayal itself requires explanation*.

The real task that the contradictory development from the once revolutionary slogan "All Power to the Councils" to the now capitalist-fascist regime in the so-called socialist soviet-state has put on the agenda for us class-conscious revolutionary proletarians is rather a task of *revolutionary self-critique*. We must recognize that not only does that *revolutionary dialectic* apply to the ideas and institutions of the feudal and bourgeois past, but likewise to all thoughts and organizational forms which the working class itself has already brought forward during the hitherto prevailing stages of its historical struggle for liberation. It is this dialectic which causes the *good deed* of yesterday to become the misery of today as Goethe said in his *Faust* - as it is more clearly and definitely expressed by Karl Marx: every historical form turns at a certain point of its development from a *developing form* of revolutionary forces of production, revolutionary action, and developing consciousness into the *shackles* of that developing form. And as this dialectical *antithesis* of revolutionary development applies to all other historical ideas and formations, it equally applies also to those *philosophical* and *organizational results of a certain historical phase of revolutionary class struggle*, which is exemplified by the Paris communards of almost 60 years ago in the "finally discovered" political form of government of the working class in the shape of a *revolutionary commune*. The same

is applicable to the following new historical phase of struggle in the revolutionary movement of the Russian workers and peasants, and the international working class, which brought forth the new form of the "*revolutionary councils power*."

Instead of bewailing the "betrayal" of the council concept and the "degeneration" of the council power we must gather by illusion-free, sober, and historically objective observation the beginning, middle, and end of this whole development within a *total historical panorama* and we must pose this *critical question*: What is - after this total historical experience -*the real historical and class-oriented significance of this new political form of government,* which brought about in the first place the *revolutionary Commune* of 1871, although its development was forcefully interrupted after 72 days duration, and then the *Russian Revolution of 1917* in concrete, more final, shape?

It is all the more necessary to once again basically orient ourselves concerning the historical and class-oriented character of the revolutionary commune and its further development, the revolutionary councils system, for even the barest of historical critique shows how completely unfounded the widely spread conception is today among revolutionaries who theoretically reject and want to "destroy" in practice the parliament, conceived as a bourgeois institution with regard to its origin and purpose, and yet at the same time see the so-called council system, and also its predecessor the revolutionary commune, as the essential form of proletarian government which stands with its whole essence in irreconcilable opposition to the essence of the bourgeois state; in reality it is the "commune," in its almost thousand years of historical development, which represents an *older*, bourgeois form of government than parliament. The commune forms from the beginnings in the eleventh century up to that highest culmination which the revolutionary movement of the bourgeoisie found in the French Revolution of 1789/93 the almost *pure class-oriented manifestation of that struggle which in this whole historical epoch the then revolutionary bourgeois class has waged in various forms*

for the revolutionary change of the whole hitherto existing feudal order of society and the founding of the new bourgeois social order.

When Marx - as we saw in the previously quoted sentence of his "Civil War in France" - celebrated the *revolutionary Commune of the Paris workers of 1871 as the "finally discovered political form under which the economic liberation of labor could be consummated*," he was aware at the same time that the "commune" could only take on this new character - its traditional form having been passed on over hundreds of years of bourgeois struggle for freedom - *if it radically changed its entire previous nature*. He expressly concerns himself with the misinterpretations of those who at that time wanted to regard this "*new commune which shatters the modem state power*" as a "revival of the medieval communes which preceded that state power and thence formed their foundation." And he was far removed from expecting any wondrous effects for the proletarian class struggle from the political *form* of the communal constitution per se- detached from the definite proletarian class-oriented content, with which the Paris workers, according to his concept, had for one historical moment filled this political form, achieved through struggle and put into the service of their economic self-liberation. To him the decisive reason enabling the Paris workers to make the traditional form of the "commune" the instrument of a purpose which was so completely opposed to their original historically determined goal lies, rather, on the contrary, in its being *relatively undeveloped and indeterminate*. In the fully formed bourgeois state, as it developed in its classical shape especially in France (i.e., in the *centralized modern representative-state*), the supreme power of the state is, according to the well known words of the "Communist Manifesto," *nothing more than "an executive committee which administers the common affairs of the bourgeois class as a whole*"; thus its bourgeois class character is readily apparent. However, in those underdeveloped early historical forms of bourgeois state constitutions, that also include the medieval "free commune," this bourgeois class character, which essentially adheres to every state, comes to light in a quite different form. As opposed to the later ever more clearly appearing and ever more purely developed character of the bourgeois state power as a

"supreme public power for the suppression of the working class, a machine of class rule" (Marx), we see that in this earlier phase of development the originally determined goal of the bourgeois class organization still prevails as an organ of the revolutionary struggle of liberation of the suppressed bourgeois class against the medieval feudal rule. However little this struggle of the medieval bourgeoisie has in common with the proletarian struggle for emancipation of the present historical epoch it yet remains as a *historical class struggle*. And those instruments created then by the bourgeoisie for the requirements of their revolutionary struggle contain to a certain extent—but only to a certain extent—certain formal connecting links with the formation of today's revolutionary struggle of emancipation which is being continued by the *proletarian class* on another basis, under other conditions, and for other purposes.

Karl Marx had already at an earlier date pointed out the special significance which these earlier experiences and achievements of the bourgeois class struggle—which found their most important expression in the various phases of development of the *revolutionary bourgeois commune of the middle ages*—had in regard to the forming of modern proletarian class consciousness and class struggle; in fact, he pointed this out very much earlier than the great historical event of the Paris Commune insurrection of 1871 permitted him to praise this new revolutionary commune of the Parisian workers as the finally discovered political form of economic liberation of labor. He had demonstrated the *historical analogy* existing between *the political development of the bourgeoisie* as the suppressed class struggling for liberation within the medieval feudal state and *the development of the proletariat in modern capitalist society*. It is from this perspective that he was able to win his main theoretical support for his special dialectical revolutionary *theory of the significance of trade unions and the trade union struggle* - a theory which until this day is still not completely and correctly understood by many Marxists from both the left and right wing. And he arrived at it by comparing the modern coalitions of workers with the communes of the medieval bourgeoisie, stressing the historical fact that *the bourgeois class likewise began their struggle against the feudal social*

order by forming coalitions. Already in the polemical treatise against Proudhon we find in regard to this point the following illustration, classical to this day:

> "In the bourgeoisie we have two phases to distinguish: that in which it constituted itself as a class under the regime of feudalism and absolute monarchy, and that in which, already constituted as a class, it overthrew feudalism and monarchy to make society into a bourgeois society. The first of these phases was the longer and necessitated the greater efforts. This too began by partial combinations against the feudal lords.
>
> Much research has been carried out to trace the different historical phases that the bourgeoisie has passed through, from the commune up to its constitution as a class.
>
> But when it is a question of making a precise study of strikes, combinations and other forms in which the proletarians carry out before our eyes their organization as a class, some are seized with real fear and others display a *transcendental* disdain." (Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, chapter 2, 5)

What is theoretically articulated here, by the young Marx in the 1840's, who only recently crossed over to proletarian socialism, and what he repeats in a similar form a few years later in the *Communist Manifesto* by illustrating the diverse phases of development of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, he also articulates once again 20 years later in the well known resolution of the Geneva Congress of the International Association of Workers with regard to trade unions. He argues that the trade unions have already during their hitherto prevailing development become "*the focal points of organization of the working class ... Just as the medieval municipalities and villages had become focal points of the bourgeoisie*." This is so although the trade unions are not aware of their focal significance beyond the immediate daily tasks of defending the wages and working hours of the workers against the continuous excessive demands of capital.

Hence in the future the trade unions *must act consciously as such focal points of the organization of the whole working class*.

II

If one wants to understand Marx's later position regarding *the revolutionary commune of the Parisian workers* in its real significance, one must take his original concept on the historical relationship between the organizational forms of the modern proletarian and the earlier bourgeois class struggle as a starting point. The commune arose from the struggle of the producing class against the exploiting class and broke up in a revolutionary act the prevailing bourgeois state machinery. When Marx celebrates this new commune as the finally discovered form for the liberation of labor, it was not at all his desire—as some of his followers later claimed and still do so to this day—to designate or brand *a definite form of political organization*, whether it is called a *revolutionary commune* or a *revolutionary council system*, as a singularly appropriate and potential form of the revolutionary proletarian class dictatorship. In the immediately preceding sentence, he expressly points to "the multifariousness of interpretations which supported the commune and the multiplicity of interests expressed in the commune," and he explained the already established character of this new form of government as a "*political form thoroughly capable of development*." It is just this *unlimited capability of development* of new forms of political power, created by the Paris communards in the fire of battle, which distinguished it from the "classic development of bourgeois government," the centralized state power of the modern parliamentary republic. Marx's essential presupposition is that in the energetic pursuit of the real interests of the working class this form can in the end even be used as that lever which will overthrow the economic bases forming the existence of classes, class rule, and the state. The *revolutionary communal constitution* thus becomes under certain historical conditions the political form of a *process of development*, or to put it more clearly, of a *revolutionary action* where the basic essential goal is no longer to *preserve any one form of state rule,*

or *even to create a newer "higher state-type*," but rather to create at last the material conditions for the "withering away of every state altogether." *Without this last condition, the communal constitution was all impossibility and all illusion*," Marx says in this context with all desired distinctness.

Nonetheless, there remains still an unbalanced *contradiction* between on one hand Marx's characterization of the Paris Commune as the finally discovered "*political form*" for accomplishing the economic and social self-liberation of the working class and, on the other hand, his emphasis at the same time that the suitability of the commune for this purpose rests mainly on its *formlessness*; that is, on its indeterminateness and openness to multiple interpretations. It appears there is only one point at which Marx's position is perfectly clear and to which he professed at this time under the influence of certain political theories he had in the meantime come up against and which were incorporated in this original political concept-and not least under the practical impression of the enormous experience of the Paris Commune itself. While in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1847-48 and likewise in the Inaugural Address to the International Workers' Association in 1864, he still had only spoken of the necessity "*for the proletariat to conquer political power*" now the experiences of the Paris Commune provided him with the proof that "the working class can not simply appropriate the ready-made state machinery and put it into motion for its own purposes, *but it must smash the existing bourgeois state machinery in a revolutionary way."* This sentence has since been regarded as an essential main proposition and core of the whole political theory of Marxism, especially since in 1917 Lenin at once theoretically restored the unadulterated Marxian theory of the state in his work *State and Revolution* and practically realized it through carrying through the October Revolution as its executor.

But obviously nothing positive is at all yet said about the *formal character* of the new revolutionary supreme state power of the proletariat with the merely *negative determination* that the state power cannot simply "appropriate the state machinery" of the

previous bourgeois state "for the working class and set it in motion for their own purposes." So we must ask: for which reasons does the "Commune" in its particular, determinate form represent the finally discovered political form of government for the working class, as Marx puts it in his *Civil War*, and as Engels characterizes it once more at great length in his introduction to the third edition of *Civil War* twenty years later? Whatever gave Marx and Engels, those fiery admirers of the *centralized system of revolutionary bourgeois dictatorship realized by the great French Revolution*, the idea to regard precisely the "Commune" as the "political form" of the *revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*, when it appeared to be the complete opposite to that system?

In fact, if we analyze more exactly the political program and goals to be attained as proposed by the two founders of scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, not only in the time *before the Paris Commune insurrection*, but also *afterwards*, the assertion cannot be maintained that the form of proletarian dictatorship realized by the Paris Commune of 1871 would in any particular sense be in unison with those political theories. Indeed, Marx's great opponent in the First International, *Michael Bakunin*, had on this point the historical truth on his side when he sarcastically commented on Marx's having annexed the Paris Commune retrospectively:

> "The impact of the Communist insurrection was so powerful that even the Marxists, who had all their ideas thrown to the wind by it, were forced to doff their hats to it. They did more than that: *in contradiction to all logic and their innermost feelings, they adopted the program of the Commune and its aim as their own*. It was a comic, but enforced travesty. They had to do it, otherwise they would have been rejected and abandoned by all- so mighty was the passion which this revolution had brought about in the whole world." (Cf. [Fritz] Brupbacher: *Marx and Bakunin*, pp. 114-115.)

The revolutionary ideas of the Paris communardes of 1871 are partly derived from the federalistic program of Bakunin and Proudhon,

partly from the circle of ideas of the revolutionary Jacobins surviving in Blanquism, and only to a very small degree in Marxism. Twenty years later, Friedrich Engels claimed that the Blanquists who formed the majority of the Paris Commune had been forced by the sheer weight of the facts to proclaim instead of their own program of a "strict dictatorial centralization of all power in the hands of the new revolutionary government" the exact opposite, namely the *free federation of all French communes with the Paris Commune*. On this issue the same contradiction arises between Marx and Engels' political theory upheld so far and their now prevailing unconditional acknowledgment of the commune as the "finally discovered political form" of the government of the working class. It is erroneous when Lenin in his 1917 work *State and Revolution* describes the evolution of the Marxian theory of state, as if Marx had in the transition period up to 1852 already concertized the abstract formulation of the political task of the revolutionary proletariat (as proposed in his "Communist Manifesto" of 1847-48) to the effect that the victorious proletariat must "*destroy*" and "*smash*", the existing bourgeois supreme state power. Against this thesis of Lenin speaks Marx and Engels' own testimony, who both declared repeatedly that just the *experience of the Paris Commune of 1871* provided for the first time the effective *proof* that "*the working class cannot simply appropriate the ready made state machinery and set it in motion for its own purposes*." It was Lenin himself who provided the logical gap appearing in his presentation of the development of revolutionary Marxist state theory at this point by *simply jumping over a time span of 20 years* in his otherwise so historically correct and philologically exact reproduction of Marx and Engels' remarks on the state. He proceeds from the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) straight on to the *Civil War in France* (1871) and in so doing overlooks among other things the fact that Marx summarized the whole "political program" of the working class in this one lapidary sentence of his Inaugural Address of the First International: "*It is therefore the great task of the working class now to seize political power*."

Yet even in the time after 1871, when Marx, on account of the experience of the Paris Commune, advocated in a far more certain

and unequivocal way that ever before the indispensable necessity of crushing the bourgeois state machinery and building the proletarian class dictatorship, he was far removed from propagating *a form of government modelled on the revolutionary Paris Commune as the political form* of proletarian dictatorship. Just for that one historical moment—in which he unconditionally and without reservations came forward on behalf of the heroic fighters and victims of the commune vis-à-vis the triumphant reaction did he, or so it appears, uphold this standpoint—and I am referring to the *Address to the General Council of the International Workers' Association on the Civil War in France,* written in blood and fire on behalf of this first international organization of the revolutionary proletariat. For the sake of the revolutionary *essence* of the Paris Commune, he repressed the critique which from his standpoint he should have exercised on the special *form* of its historical manifestation. If beyond that he even went a step further and celebrated the political form of the revolutionary communal-constitution directly as the "finally discovered form" of the proletarian dictatorship, then the explanation does not lie any more merely with his natural *solidarity* with the revolutionary workers of Paris, but also in a special, *subsidiary purpose*. Having written the *Address to the General Council of the I.W.A* directly after the glorious battle and defeat of the Paris communards, Marx not only wanted to *annex the Marxism of the Commune but also at the same time the Commune to Marxism*. It is in this sense that one must understand this remarkable document, if one wishes to correctly grasp its meaning and range of significance not only as a classic historical document looked at as a hero's epic or as a death lament. Rather beyond all that, it should be seen as *a fractional polemical treatise of Marx against his most intimate opponents in the bitter struggles which had already broken out and would soon thereafter lead to the collapse of the First International*. This fractional subsidiary purpose hindered Marx from appraising in a historically correct and complete way that interconnecting revolutionary movement of the French proletariat which began with the insurrections of the Commune in Lyon and Marseilles in 1870 and had its climax in the Paris Commune insurrection of 1871. It also forced him to explain the *revolutionary communal constitution*,

welcomed as the "finally discovered political form" of proletarian class dictatorship, as a *centralist* government as well - although this was in contrast to its actual essential being.

Already Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels themselves, and more so Lenin, deny the charge that the Paris Commune had an essentially federalist character. If Marx cannot help but explain in his short account of the sketch of the All-French Communal Constitution produced by the Paris Commune the unambiguous federalist aspects of this constitution, then in so doing he still emphasizes purposively the fact (naturally not denied by such federalists as Proudhon and Bakunin) that "*the unity of the nation was not to be broken but on the contrary was to be organized*" through this communal constitution. He underlines "*the few but important functions*" which are *still remaining to be dealt with by a "central government"* within this communal constitution. He remarks that according to the plan of the Commune these functions "*were not - as some intentionally falsified—to be abolished, but were to be transferred to communal (and strictly responsible) civil servants*." On this basis, Lenin later declared that "*not a trace of federalism is to be found*" in Marx's writings on the example of the Commune. "Marx is a centralist and in his explanations cited here there is no deviation from centralism" (*State and Revolution*). Quite correctly so, but Lenin omits to mention at this point that Marx's exposition of the Paris Commune is also everything else but a historically correct characterization of the revolutionary commune constitution aspired to by the Paris communards and realized in the first beginnings.

In order to deflect from the federative and anti-centralist character of the Paris Commune as much as possible, Marx and Engels, and likewise Lenin, have emphasized above all else the negative aspect, that it represents as such the *destruction of the prevailing bourgeois state power*. On this point there is no quarrel among revolutionaries. Marx, Engels, and Lenin have justly emphasized that the decisive foundation for the proletarian revolutionary character of the form of political supreme power as stated by the Commune is to be sought in its societal being as a realization of proletarian class dictatorship.

They pointed out to their "federalist" adversaries with great severity that the *decentralized, federative sidle form as such is quite as bourgeois as the centralist form of government of the modern bourgeois state*. They nevertheless committed the same error which they so strongly opposed in their opponents, not by concentrating on the "federalist" character of the communal constitution, but rather by emphasizing too much the other *formal differences which distinguished the Paris Commune from parliamentarism and other surpassed forms of the bourgeois state constitution* (for example, on the replacement of the standing army through the militia, on the unification of executive and legislative power, and on the responsibility and right of dismissal of "communal" functionaries). They thereby created a considerable confusion of concepts out of which emerged not only harmful effects with regard to the position of Marxism vis-à-vis the Paris commune, but also likewise for the later positing of the revolutionary Marxist direction vis-à-vis the new historical phenomenon of the revolutionary council system.

As incorrect as it may be to see with Proudhon and Bakunin an overcoming of the bourgeois state in the "federative" form, it is just as incorrect when today some Marxist followers of the revolutionary commune on the revolutionary council system believe on the basis of such misunderstood explanations by Marx, Engels, and Lenin that a parliamentary representative with a short-term, binding mandate revocable at any time, or a government functionary employed by private treaty for ordinary "wages," would be a less bourgeois arrangement than an elected parliamentarian. It is completely erroneous when they believe that there are any "communal" or "council-like" forms of constitution whose introduction may cause the state governed by the revolutionary proletarian party in the end to relinquish completely that character of an instrument of class suppression which adheres to every state. The whole theory of the final "withering away of the state in Communist society," taken over by Marx and Engels out of the tradition of utopian socialism and further developed on the basis of practical experiences of the proletarian class struggle in their time, loses its revolutionary meaning when one declares with Lenin that there is a state where

the minority does not suppress anymore the majority, but rather "the majority of the people themselves suppress their own suppressors"; and such a state of proletarian dictatorship then in its capacity as "fulfiller" of true or proletarian democracy "*is already a withering away of the state*" (*State and Revolution*).

It is high time again to posit with full clarity the two *basic theories* of the real revolutionary proletarian theory which by *temporary adapting* to practical requirements of such certain phases of struggle as the Paris Commune insurrection of 1871 and the Russian October Revolution of 1917 in the end ran into danger of being abrogated. The essential final goal of proletarian class struggle is not any one *state*, however "democratic," "communal," or even "council-like," but is rather the classless and stateless Communist *society* whose comprehensive *form* is not any longer some kind of political power but is "*that association in which the free development of every person is the condition for the free development of all*" ("Communist Manifesto").

Irrespective of whether the proletarian class can "conquer" more or less unchanged the surpassed state apparatus following the illusion of the Marxist reformists, or whether it can only really appropriate it according to revolutionary Marxist theory by radically "smashing" its surpassed form and "replacing" it through a new voluntary created form - until then, in either case this state will differ from the bourgeois state in the period of revolutionary transformation of capitalist into Communist society only *through its class nature and its social function, but not through its political form*. The true secret of the revolutionary commune, the revolutionary council system, and every other historical manifestation of government of the working class exists in this social content and not in anyone artificially devised political form or in such special institutions as may once have been realized under some particular historical circumstances.

This is where we meet each other
once the cameras have been destroyed,
once the metering of time by hallways and workdays
by which we experience a change of ownership
has been destroyed, and the face deformed by things it has to say,
destroyed,
and the diagrammatic metals of combustible elsewheres, destroyed,
and the destruction, destroyed.

-Jasper Bernes, "We Are Nothing And So Can You"

It is not a crumb of bread, but the harvest of the entire world that the human race needs, without exploiters and without exploited.

Louise Michel

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